Fingerprinting at the Bar
Criminal Identification in Liberal and Fascist Italy

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FINGERPRINTING AT THE BAR

CRIMINAL IDENTIFICATION IN LIBERAL AND FASCIST ITALY

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I certify that all material in this thesis which is not my own work has been identified and that no material has previously been submitted and approved for the award of a degree by this or any other University.

ABSTRACT

Between the end of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century, criminal anthropology was a very influential theory for criminologists throughout the western world. Proposed by the Italian alienist Cesare Lombroso, its theoretical core centred on the figure of the "criminal man," a character atavistic instinct forced to live a life of crime. By filling a gap in the literature, this work deals with the historical and sociological circumstances in which criminal anthropology emerged and prospered, and concentrates on the impact Lombroso's theory had on the development of scientific policing in Italy since the beginning of the twentieth century. A detailed account of the causes that favoured the rise of Lombroso's scientific police provides an explanation for the appeal criminal anthropology exerted on western political elites. In Italy, the Lombrosian approach left his mark on the development of highly specific forensic tools like fingerprinting, and this had a strong impact on their utilisation by fascist authorities as the account of a famous case of identity fraud occurred in Italy in 1927 revealed. As a result, it is argued that the production of Lombrosian scientific policing was shaped by the wider cultural and social goals of the actors involved, as it is of any other form of knowledge. By choosing to sideline Lombrosian techniques, fascist authorities favoured the exploitation of un-scientific methods of crime prevention that, it is argued, were not perceived as inferior, anachronistic, or unreliable. Such a choice was dictated by specific social goals that favoured the implementation of constitutional anthropology on Lombrosian science of the deviance. Finally, it is suggested that this socio-historical reading of the Italian case could cast more light on the complex relationship between totalitarianism, technology, and forms public surveillance.

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